

## From Teacher Candidates to ESL Ambassadors in Teacher Education

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the process and impact of a pre-service teacher education course assignment that engaged teacher candidates in developing and delivering an ESL professional development night for faculty colleagues and teachers from the field. The night involved a reader's theatre performance and follow-up discussion of Tara Goldstein's (2003) play *Hong Kong, Canada*, exploring issues facing students and teachers in a multilingual high school, as well as a resource display containing content-based ESL lessons and resources developed by the candidates. Feedback received from teacher candidates who organized and led the session suggests that the evening was successful in enhancing candidates' ESL-related and professional confidence, and helping them apply learning from the course in practical and meaningful ways. Situating findings within the context of ESL teacher education in Manitoba, implications for collaborative curriculum development and bridging the theory/practice divide are discussed.

### Introduction

Exploring effective practices for preparing teachers to work with ESL learners is a growing concern in teacher education programs in English-speaking contexts internationally, as numbers of newcomers who speak languages other than English increase. However, to date a comprehensive model of ESL-inclusive teacher education has not been established. The issue becomes more complex when considering that many teacher education programs address ESL in an "add-on" fashion, offering little in the way of ESL-specific pedagogy beyond an elective course that only a small number of teacher candidates take in any given year. The question in such contexts then becomes

how to address ESL issues and teaching strategies in meaningful ways given program constraints, time limitations, and other worthy interests that simultaneously struggle for priority in the teacher education curriculum, such as technology, global education, and special needs, to name a few.

This article investigates how ESL pedagogy and issues may be made more relevant within the framework of mainstream teacher education by analyzing a 2004 course assignment that engaged teacher candidates in developing and delivering an ESL professional development night for faculty colleagues and teachers from the field. First, I situate this inquiry within its context of cultural and linguistic diversity in the Canadian province of Manitoba, following which I explore the role of teacher education in preparing teachers to work with newcomer ESL students. I then describe the program and course context, and specific assignment requirements. Next, I analyze the feedback received from teacher candidates who delivered the ESL professional development and discuss insights related to collaborative curriculum development and bridging the theory/practice divide in ESL teacher education. Finally, I address recommendations for teacher educators and caveats relating to this type of assignment.

## **The Manitoba Context**

Current ESL research and practice recognizes the need to provide mainstream K-12 teachers with strategies, resources, and support for meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners found in classrooms throughout North America (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Coelho, 2004; Goldstein, 2003; Nieto, 2002). In the Canadian context, this need is becoming increasingly apparent in Manitoba, as the government works towards its goal of attracting 10,000 newcomers to the province annually (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, 2004). Many of these individuals are school-age children who come from language backgrounds other than English, and who receive only two years of funding to support their learning of English. For example, in 2003, of the 6500 people who immigrated to Manitoba, only 450 declared English as their mother tongue, while 3000 were between 0-24 years of age (MECY, 2004). Children who were born in Canada and who speak a language other than English in the home prior to starting school are not eligible for ESL funding at all. These stipulations have serious implications for the academic success of ESL learners, especially considering the substantial evidence that a minimum of 5-7 years (Cummins, 2000) is required for ESL learners to acquire the academic language proficiency necessary to perform at grade-appropriate levels in school.

A recent review of ESL programming in Manitoba (MECY, 2003) suggests that much ESL support has heretofore been provided on an ad hoc basis, in part because the concentrations and numbers of ESL learners in any given school division tend to shift regularly. ESL specialists and standardized programming are found mainly in those few school divisions with consistently high concentrations of ESL learners. Yet greater numbers of school divisions are receiving newcomer ESL students, reinforcing the

responsibility of mainstream classroom teachers to foster the language development of these students.

## **The Role of Teacher Education in Preparing Teachers to Work with ESL Students**

The growing responsibility of mainstream classroom teachers to meet the needs of ESL students corresponds with greater pressure on teacher education programs to provide ESL-specific training for pre-service teachers. However, the most effective practices for integrating ESL approaches into teacher education remain unclear. Some programs fully integrate ESL-related pedagogy and issues into mandatory components of their programs, while others infuse ESL teaching strategies across the curriculum of the pre-service program (Gagné, 2002; Terrill & Mark, 2000). Some programs offer an optional course addressing ESL issues, while others still employ a combination of approaches, operating under the assumption that one size does not fit all when preparing teachers to cope with cultural and linguistic diversity.

Research in second language teacher education (e.g., Nieto, 2002; Merryfield, 2000), experiential learning (Cassidy, 2001; Kolb, 1984; Loughran & Northfield, 1996), and ways of bridging theory and practice in teacher education (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; MacDonald, Badger, & White, 2001) provides useful insights about effective practices in preparing mainstream classrooms teachers to work with ESL learners. Aptly articulating concerns raised in much of the research, Johnson (1996) investigates the dichotomous relationship between theory and practice in second language teacher education and urges those involved to develop more realistic expectations about what theory does and does not do for ESL teachers. In an attempt to make sense of the role of theory in teacher education, Johnson (1996) acknowledges the growing awareness of researchers and practitioners:

That what teachers know about teaching is not simple an extended body of facts and theories but is instead largely experiential and socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come . . . [In addition,] researchers and practitioners have begun to recognize teaching as a socially constructed activity that requires the interpretation and negotiation of meanings embedded within the classrooms and schools where teachers teach. And finally, they have begun to recognize that learning to teach is a complex developmental process that is acquired by participating in the social practices associated with teaching and learning. (pp. 766-767)

Ideally, then, ESL teacher education courses will be sensitive to this experiential and highly contextualized nature of learning to teach ESL students.

## **Program and Course Context**

The University of Manitoba's two-year pre-service teacher education program (catering

to approximately 600 teacher candidates per year) includes a 12-hour mandatory ESL pedagogy component for teacher candidates in the elementary program only. This component has traditionally been offered at the very end of the two-year program, once "regular" coursework is complete. Otherwise, teacher candidates interested in learning about ESL-related strategies and issues for mainstream classroom teachers can take an elective 39-hour course entitled *Language and Content Instruction of ESL/Bilingual Students*. This course is also open to candidates in the University of Manitoba's 200-hour Certificate in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (C-TESL) program (also catering to approximately 600 candidates per year). Some of these candidates intend to work in K-12 or adult ESL contexts in Canada, while others plan on teaching EFL to children or adults overseas. It is this within this complex program and course context that this inquiry is situated, focusing on an assignment that engaged B.Ed. and C-TESL candidates in the *Language and Content Instruction* course in planning and delivering ESL-related professional development for peers and teachers from the field.

### **The Assignment: Designing and Delivering an ESL Professional Development (PD) Night**

This assignment served as the culminating task in the course (see Appendix A for the assignment description and evaluation). Teacher candidates were encouraged to select the form of contribution they wanted to make to the PD night; they could either participate in a reading of Tara Goldstein's (2003) one-act critical ethnographic play *Hong Kong, Canada*, or develop and display content-based ESL teaching resources (such as lesson ideas or specific tasks) involving a subject-area of their choice. The play had been discussed earlier in the course as we explored issues around multilingualism in K-12 schools and the possibility of using drama to explore anti-discrimination. Strategies and resources for content-based language teaching had also been addressed regularly throughout the course.

This assignment evolved as the course unfolded and in fact the decision to make this PD session the final assignment was the result of negotiation between me and the participating teacher candidates. Initially, I had envisioned candidates constructing ESL-inclusive lesson plans for their final assignment, and scheduling a public reading of Goldstein's play as an optional activity for interested class members. However, a number of teacher candidates expressed weariness and dismay at the possibility of doing more lesson plans, having constructed many within the framework of other courses. Therefore, I brought the issue before the class and asked everyone for their opinion about the idea of expanding the play reading to include resources and having everyone participate as their final assignment. Class members unanimously agreed. Several teacher candidates who had been absent during our initial class discussion of *Hong Kong, Canada* were particularly enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate in the play. I felt it was important to also offer the alternative of developing content-based ESL resources for those candidates who wanted an assignment that was closer to what was initially intended in the course and who may have been uncomfortable with

the idea of doing a public play reading. Furthermore, since the play was more oriented to K-12 issues, those class members from the C-TESL program interested in adult ESL could opt to develop resources relevant to their needs. In other words, this flexible final assignment helped address the diverse needs of the teacher candidates within my class. The fact that the course was held during an evening timeslot meant that we could hold the PD session during one of our regular meetings, ensuring that all class members would be able to participate and teachers from the field could attend.

I acted as a facilitator for the event, providing input and feedback to candidates as they rehearsed the play reading or developed their resources. Candidates worked in teams over two class periods to prepare for the professional development session. One teacher candidate with a background in drama and theatre assumed the role of directing the play reading, and the other teacher candidates involved in the reading provided suggestions regarding the costumes, props, and staging. For example, one candidate thought wearing masks would add to the dramatic effect of the play, a suggestion that was readily adopted by others in the group. Blind casting was used to determine roles; teacher candidates selected their characters in a lottery fashion. Those who had fewer lines to read took on additional responsibilities such as constructing or collecting the props, or generating discussion questions to prompt audience reactions following the reading. Those candidates involved in developing resources also worked collaboratively, soliciting feedback from one another regarding their materials. Teacher candidates required very little guidance from me during this development process, an issue that I will discuss more thoroughly in the implications section where I highlight the benefits of this assignment in fostering a sense of curricular ownership amongst course participants. Most of my time was spent on behind-the-scenes administration and organization, for example, soliciting administrative approval to hold the event, publicizing the event within the university and partner schools, and arranging for extra seating and refreshments.

The PD session was offered on a Wednesday evening from 6-8 p.m. in early December, 2004. About 35 people attended, including faculty and other teacher candidates from the university, teachers from collaborating schools, and friends and family of class members. The first hour was devoted to the play reading, which included a brief welcome and introduction, the actual reading of the play, and follow-up discussion amongst audience members and teacher candidates. Issues that were raised in the subsequent discussion included the extent to which Manitoba schools should be inclusive of languages other than English or French, and how the blind casting and use of masks compelled the audience to listen especially carefully to the words of each character. The second hour invited session participants to have some refreshments and explore the resources on display on tables set up outside the classroom where the play was read.

In the class following the PD event, teacher candidates made presentations to their peers sharing their experiences of how they contributed to the session and their

reflections on the event. At this point an evaluation checklist (see Appendix A) and comments, accounting for 50% of the assignment grade, were completed by each candidate. I also completed an evaluation checklist for each candidate to make up the remaining 50%. Evaluation considered elements such as relevance to the content of the course, range of topics explored, reflection, evidence of growth, and clarity of formulation.

## **Feedback from Participating Teacher Candidates**

I have selected six teacher candidates' comments that were representative of those shared by class members. These comments were included on the evaluation sheets candidates completed for themselves during the (final) class following the PD night. As the sample comments show, candidates reflected on a range of different issues, including the content of the play, the process of preparing and refining materials, professional lessons learned, and personal growth experiences. Each comment is prefaced with an introduction, explaining contextual elements as needed.

The first comment touches upon the challenges inherent in representing one of the play's characters, Sarah, who demonstrates problematic attitudes toward diversity. This teacher candidate was told by a session participant following the play reading that the candidate had been so effective at representing Sarah's character she actually inspired hateful feelings from this audience member. This comment also reflects the personal growth that stemmed from reading the play in a public forum, growth that had not been possible when the play had been read and discussed in class.

Participating in the PD night production of *Hong Kong, Canada* really 'stretched' me—both emotionally and intellectually, and in ways I'd never anticipated when I first signed up for the play. Playing Sarah had a real impact on me—not only in the moment, but afterwards especially. As I'd said in the post-play presentation, I found myself questioning serious issues of racism vs. ignorance/youth naiveté. Also, both during and after the performance, I had to grapple with how playing the role of Sarah had an impact on my own personal psyche and identity (i.e., the difficulty of playing a "racist" character—or one who'd be perceived as racist by many—and the difficulty of actually being told I was "hated" as a character.) I began to consider cross-cultural issues and issues of interpersonal conflict, in ways that I never did upon simply reading the play. Considering these factors will help me not only in the realm of future ESL teaching, but in personal, 'non-classroom', everyday cultural situations.

The second comment shows how candidates were encouraged to build on their prior knowledge in this assignment by refining lesson ideas that had initially been developed in other courses. One of the strengths of an assignment such as this one is that it enables connections between different courses and reinforces the importance of the course-based aspect of the teacher education program, an approach advocated in the work of Beck and Kosnik (2002).

The unit plans I presented were originally developed in other C-TESL courses I've taken. After this course I was able to recognize some things that needed to be revised to make the plans more flexible and applicable to different situations and differentiated learning. I believe I have benefited from what we learned in class, particularly with respect to showing sensitivity and tolerance for those with beliefs and values systems different than my own. I think if I were to deliver my unit again I would be able to draw on more of the students' knowledge and experience to help them relate to the content. This is where I see evidence of my personal growth-a greater ability to see the big picture and try to view it through the eyes of the students. Thanks for facilitating a positive and interesting learning experience.

In the third comment, the teacher candidate hints at improved confidence as a result of participating in the play reading. She also expresses the value of recognizing the privilege associated with her position as a white, native speaker of English, and unearthing some of her long-held prejudicial assumptions about non-native speakers of English (i.e., that they make inappropriate university professors in an English context). Encouraging a critical perspective was one of Goldstein's (2003) purposes in crafting the play as a tool for anti-discriminatory teacher education.

I felt I grew because I didn't think I would have the courage to get up in front of an audience. And I have always wanted to be in a play instead of being the teacher/director . . . . Sometimes people don't feel they are prejudiced and I felt that I wasn't. I have never experienced discrimination being English speaking and white. I guess I discovered that I have some prejudices. I know I felt my university teachers should be able to speak [native/near-native] English. So I was prejudiced in thinking that and have now realized that.

The fourth comment reflects the unique opportunity to move from the role of teacher candidate to what I term ESL ambassador in delivering the PD session. With ESL issues and strategies being addressed in such a limited manner in our pre-service program, one objective of this course is that participants will disseminate their learning to others in the program and beyond. The mention of scaffolding suggests that the candidate found the experience to be supportive yet one that also allowed for new learning. This comment also serves as a salient reminder of the changing dynamic of many teacher education programs in Canada; increasingly, our programs attract candidates who have had one or more careers prior to entering teaching. The wealth of knowledge and expertise they candidates bring to the program further reinforces the appropriateness of participatory approaches to curriculum development.

A unique and novel project. As a Bachelor of Education student, I usually look for PD sessions to attend. It was educational to "have the shoe on the other foot". It was a good scaffolding exercise for me, as I had organized professional development sessions during my previous career (i.e., fundraising), but not as an educator.

The fifth comment speaks to the value of using the play as a means to address discrimination. Though it was never suggested during the course that racism is most effectively addressed in non-confrontational ways, the candidate seems to recognize the possibilities for using drama to explore potentially uncomfortable topics. This teacher candidate also sees this PD event informing his future teaching.

I enjoyed this assignment more than almost any other I've done in university. The opportunity to do the play was appreciated and enjoyable. I was really impressed by the play itself, and think it is a fabulous way to deal with racism, without being confrontational. I was really pleased with the positive responses from the group and audience members. This is something I think is so good, that I will do my utmost to do in schools, when I am a teacher. The students (and invited parents) will have to think, without being preached to.

The sixth comment attests to the candidate's enhanced professional confidence as a result of providing professional development through the resources he displayed and shared with session participants. He saw this event as an opportunity to discuss with like-minded colleagues an ESL-related topic of interest for educators.

This was a great experience. Having never prepared a resource table before, I was very interested to see everyone's tables. I felt that I could have brought more to display but I was very pleased with the discussions my resources generated. It felt very professional to inform people of my topic [multicultural literature] as I feel strongly about its importance.

Only two of the candidates (out of 25 in the class) shared problematic features of the assignment, and they were related more to preparation than to the actual PD event itself. Both concerns related to acquiring and developing materials. One candidate felt afterward that she had selected too narrow a topic, activities practicing word stress patterns, to make it applicable to a mainstream class containing ESL learners. Another candidate expressed her challenge in trying to find ESL-friendly activities appropriate to a senior math classroom. She recognized in her reflection that she would have to develop most of her activities from scratch, a discovery that left her feeling somewhat dejected as a novice teacher given the already substantial demands on her time.

## Insights

The insights gained from analyzing teacher candidates' responses to this course assignment highlight three main findings: 1) prioritizing collaborative curriculum development and experiential learning in teacher education yields positive feedback from teacher candidates, 2) enabling teacher candidates to develop and deliver professional development events such as this one can aid in bridging the theory/practice divide in ESL-focused teacher education, and 3) greater confidence amongst teacher candidates can lead to increased competence as novice professionals.

First, this assignment highlighted the value of negotiating course requirements with teacher candidates and engaging them in collaborative and experiential learning, a finding supported by the work of adult and teacher educators such as Cassidy (2001), Loughran and Northfield (1996), and Kolb (1984). Cassidy (2001), for example, insists:

that experiential learning must be more than teaching participants how to apply predetermined skills and generic concepts to future life situations. Participants must be given the opportunity to explore personally meaningful concepts that come from their own history, context, and feelings for true learning to occur. (p. 22)

Inviting the teacher candidates to choose the ways in which they wanted to contribute to the ESL PD night and negotiating the terms of the assignment allowed them to explore personally meaningful concepts and fostered a sense of ownership and investment in the task that otherwise would have been lacking.

Second, developing and delivering this ESL PD session helped bridge the theory/practice divide so frequently discussed in teacher education (e.g., Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Johnson, 1996; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; MacDonald, Badger, & White, 2001) in a number of ways. The most evident bridge was in allowing teacher candidates to apply some of their learning in the course to the practical tasks of a) developing, refining, and presenting teaching resources, and b) performing publicly in the play and engaging in subsequent discussion with their colleagues about some of the issues around multilingualism and discrimination that emerged. Another bridge (this one unfortunately not as readily recognized by teacher candidates) was in establishing connections to the field (thereby strengthening university/school partnerships) by inviting collaborating teachers to the PD event and "giving back" by providing them with resources and lesson ideas.

The third main insight relates to the increased confidence that this assignment helped generate amongst candidates, by regarding them as professionals with contributions to make. Once the PD night reached its successful conclusion, several candidates confessed to me that they had initially felt some apprehension about taking responsibility for the evening because they were unsure about having anything of value to contribute to more experienced teachers. However, once the PD night started and they saw how much their efforts were valued, they realized the extent to which they had underestimated themselves. This insight can be related back to the context of ESL professional development in Manitoba. Because ESL professional development, like ESL programming, has been conducted on a fairly ad hoc basis, many teachers in the field who find themselves with newly arrived ESL learners in their classes are eager to acquire teaching strategies and discuss issues, and they often look to new graduates of teacher education for guidance.

## **Advice for Teacher Educators**

This section addresses points for teacher educators to consider when contemplating a collaborative, experiential assignment such as the one described in this article that engaged teacher candidates in developing and delivering an ESL professional development night for colleagues and collaborating teachers from the field. The following list may serve as a checklist for teacher educators to help in the planning and implementation of the assignment, as well as alleviating potential problems.

1. Ensure that all teacher candidate contributions are appropriately and equitably recognized. One teacher candidate commented in her follow-up presentation and reflection that the play reading appeared to take precedence over the resource display, since the display was set up outside the room where the reading was held and not everyone left the room at the designated time to explore the resources.
2. Allow sufficient time for in-class preparation. As mentioned earlier, I dedicated four hours of class time to preparing for the event, in recognition of the heavy course loads and practicum responsibilities that most candidates are grappling with during the semester.
3. Allow sufficient time for the extra administrative tasks required in organizing the PD event. There were a number of elements involved that went beyond what I would normally do to prepare for a class. These tasks included:
  - seeking administrative approval to hold the PD session
  - advertising the event (both within the faculty/university and to collaborating schools)
  - coordinating RSVPs
  - booking extra chairs (and possibly extra space if your classroom is unable to accommodate such a gathering)
  - organizing refreshments (in my case I had teacher candidates volunteer to provide refreshments)
  - set-up and clean up
  - photocopying handouts to distribute at the resource display

Another important reminder is that this class was held in an evening timeslot, ensuring that all class members and full-time teachers could attend the event. This type of event could be complex to arrange for a day-time class.

## **Conclusion**

The success of the ESL professional development event hosted by teacher candidates in the *Language and Content Instruction* course can in part be attributed to our environment. Teachers in Manitoba are so eager for ESL teaching strategies and issues to meet the needs of their diverse ESL populations, the very idea of such an event appealed immensely, both to those teachers who came to the evening and those I talked about it with after the fact. Indeed, the day following the ESL PD night, I met with approximately 25 ESL teachers from around the province to begin discussion of the new

ESL curriculum currently under development in Manitoba. When I mentioned the event my teacher candidates and I had hosted the previous night, many of the teachers at the meeting commented on how such events were sorely needed in the province. Several teachers at the meeting requested I send them copies of the handouts distributed during the session so they could make the resources and information available to their colleagues.

Furthermore, the literature that questions the result of such single-session professional development (Rhine, 1995) has seldom if ever considered the impact from the professional developers' stance. In this case, teacher candidates were able to transfer their learning from one of their teacher education courses to an immediately relevant real-life context, thereby helping to dispel the popular notion that much of what is learned in the course-based component of the pre-service program is highly theoretical and inapplicable to "real" teachers. In the process, candidates' professional confidence and competence were strengthened as possibilities for ESL ambassadorship were envisioned and enacted.

I am aware of the inherent danger in overestimating the impact generated by a 39-hour course on content-based language instruction (Rice Jordan, 1995), let alone a single assignment offered within the framework of that course. However, due to the relatively short time that teacher candidates spend preparing to enter their profession (often creating a disconnect with many programs' emphases on life-long learning), it seems that one objective for teacher educators should be to stimulate interest that will encourage further inquiry amongst candidates. The enthusiasm with which candidates embraced the task of developing and delivering this ESL professional development event suggests a promising foundation on which to construct future ESL-related endeavours.

## Notes

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